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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COPENHAGEN 000022

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [AF](#) [DA](#)  
SUBJECT: DENMARK: GOVERNMENT FIRM, PUBLIC NERVOUS ON  
AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Ambassador James P. Cain, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Denmark's participation in ISAF enjoys broad parliamentary support, and the Danish government is looking to do more in Afghanistan. Danish public support regarding NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, however, is slipping, jarred by continuing casualties and the perception that other Allies are unwilling to share the risks and dangers of fighting in Afghanistan's restive south. Denmark's government is moving to shore up public opinion to seal fault lines in an otherwise solid parliamentary foundation. The USG needs to acknowledge Denmark's contribution in Afghanistan, while helping with the success stories Denmark needs to convince an increasingly skeptical public that NATO can prevail against the Taliban. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Denmark's robust engagement in Afghanistan has from its beginning in 2002 enjoyed broad parliamentary support, including among the largest Danish opposition parties. Indeed, the Danish military presence in Afghanistan, part of the British-led Task Force Helmand, increased from approximately 290 soldiers to a total at the close of 2007 of roughly 550 soldiers (250 of whom were redeployed from Iraq when Denmark ended its military engagement there in summer 2007). Official Danish support has held even through nine casualties in Afghanistan, a significant number for Denmark. Five of those casualties have come in the last four months alone, raising fears here that Denmark's growing presence in Helmand is providing a larger and easier target for the Taliban.

¶3. (C) Those casualties, and a spate of negative press questioning strategy and the effectiveness of military and civilian engagement, are eating into public support for Denmark's participation in ISAF. A poll released in the closing weeks of 2007 showed 48 percent of Danes want troops brought home from Afghanistan, while 43 percent continue to support engagement. The Danish Defense Command has also, for the first time and within the last six months, encountered some difficulty in attracting new recruits to serve in Afghanistan.

¶4. (C) The Danish government says its commitment to Afghanistan is firm. In fact, Danish officials tell us they want to do more in Afghanistan. Danish MFA Security Policy Department Chief Lone Wisborg insisted January 15 that Denmark "has the momentum we need" to continue in Afghanistan. Still, officials recognize the need to shore up public support. Lisbet Zilmer-Johns, foreign policy advisor to Danish PM Rasmussen, told us recently it was no mistake the PM had focused on Afghanistan and Danish engagement there in his annual televised New Year's address. Danish officials note all of Denmark's political parties supporting the Afghanistan deployment know they need to engage with an

increasingly skeptical Danish public. Wisborg said the Danish MFA and MOD will organize an Afghanistan-themed conference in late February, focusing on Denmark's contribution and including some Afghan ministers. The Danish parliament will hold public meetings in the spring to highlight the importance of Danish support.

15. (C) The Danish government also recently released a "Helmand Plan," a series of recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of Danish reconstruction efforts in the south and focusing on more effective military and civilian cooperation. Wisborg explained that the Helmand Plan is part of a broader Danish government policy review of its overall engagement in Afghanistan. The plan has been well received by Danish policy makers and politicians.

16. (C) Both MFA and PM's office note the "Helmand Plan" and broader strategy review are designed not just to build public support but to identify areas where Denmark could offer additional contributions to ISAF. Wisborg and other contacts in the Danish MOD tell us that Denmark is keeping an open mind on OMLTs, but experts are concerned that Denmark's limited resources and experienced military officers might be spread too thin if asked to take on this additional mission. Moreover, the MFA does not consider F-16s a "foreign policy priority" for Denmark, but Wisborg acknowledged there are some in the Danish MOD and Defense Command who feel otherwise. MFA and the PM's office clearly prefer the focus of any new Danish resources should be on training the Afghan National Army.

17. (C) The Danish government is looking at other means to strengthen public and parliamentary support. MFA is gathering examples of reconstruction "success stories" that

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can be passed to politicians for use with wavering constituents. MOD continues journalist visits to Afghanistan. Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller this past week authored an op-ed piece arguing that success in Afghanistan is not merely a question of Alliance solidarity, but is also critical to Denmark's own security. Danish Chief of Defense Staff Tim Sloth Joergensen recently stated publicly that he believes Danish troops will be in Afghanistan for at least another five years, as part of a reconstruction effort that could still last another 10-15 years.

18. (C) The PM's office, meanwhile, is closely tracking public opinion and its impact on the political coalition backing the deployment. Here, said Zilmer-Johns, the government is particularly focused on dual themes of security and reconstruction, since different parties in the parliamentary coalition supporting the ISAF mission could, if public support continues to erode, split along these two lines. Denmark's minority government depends on the rightist Danish People's Party (DPP), and the DPP has been deeply skeptical of civilian reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, emphasizing instead the importance of counter-terrorism and combat missions directed at the Taliban.

19. (C) In contrast, the Danish Social Democratic Party, Denmark's largest opposition party, supports the ISAF mission but has frequently complained that the government has neglected civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan. Emphasizing that military and reconstruction efforts are complementary and mutually reinforcing (stressing the "comprehensive approach"), the Danish government remains optimistic it can address the concerns of both groups. The MFA has also begun to consult more frequently with the Social Democrats on strategy, and the Danish parliament's Foreign Policy Committee is considering a trip to Afghanistan later this year.

110. (C) Comment: While official Danish support for engagement in Afghanistan is built on a strong foundation of

cross-party support, we cannot take Denmark for granted. If trends continue and the Danish public grows more insistent in its questioning of strategy, we could see a split within parliament. The USG can help by continuing to provide Danish policy makers and politicians with success stories, and by being careful not to inadvertently slight the Danish contribution. The Danes are particularly grateful whenever our senior policymakers note their contribution publicly, as Secretary Gates did January 17, listing Denmark as one of the

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Allies the U.S. values most in southern Afghanistan. With the resolute support of the Danish government and some help from us in ensuring that the public knows its forces are both needed and valued, we believe we can continue to count on Denmark in Afghanistan.

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